

FOCUS ON EDUCATION

Inner-city school reaches agreement with league

CHICAGO (CNS) — After two months of disputes and heated debates, a predominantly white Chicago Catholic sports league reached an agreement Aug. 1 to bring a predominantly African-American inner-city school into the league.

According to a spokesman for the Chicago Archdiocese, the major issues in contention — concerns over safety, racial taunting at games and a forfeiture policy all participants could live with — were agreed to following a lengthy meeting.

The agreement must be ratified by conference participants, so details were not released, but indications were that all involved in the meeting were pleased with it.

"The language is good and satisfies (everyone)," the archdiocesan spokesman told *The Catholic New World*, newspaper of the Chicago Archdiocese.

The meeting, facilitated by Archdiocesan chancellor Jimmy Lago, representing Chicago Cardinal Francis E. George, was attended by representatives of the athletic league, the Southside Catholic Conference, which is independent of the Chicago Archdiocese, and area pastors including Father Michael Pflieger, pastor of St. Sabina's.

Father Pflieger's school initially had been turned down by the league and then withdrew once it was admitted after discussion that some coaches might forfeit games they'd have to play there.

Cardinal George had continued to encourage all the groups to work together on St. Sabina's inclusion in the league, writing in a July 27 open letter that "the difficulties are not impossible barriers."

"Despite summer vacations, serious dis-

cussion and planning have gone forward, and I am grateful for the work being done by the dedicated pastors and conference leaders," he said.

Before the settlement was announced, the league's president, Hank Lenzen, had said he believed that a majority of the suburban schools in the league would agree to policies aimed at making sure no teams forfeit their games at St. Sabina because they do not want to travel to a school in a predominantly black neighborhood.

In May, when the league's athletic directors voted down St. Sabina's admission 11-9, the reason cited was the safety of children and parents traveling to the games. League members decided to admit St. Sabina June 20, after some archdiocesan officials called the original decision racist and Cardinal George urged some parishes to change their votes.

But in July, St. Sabina said it would pull out of the league after at least one coach publicly said he would not bring his team to St. Sabina for games, and St. Sabina said the league had not offered a no-forfeit policy to which it would agree.

St. Sabina also wants the league to provide equal security measures at all games and to institute a policy against racial taunting — with consequences spelled out.

Cardinal George's July 27 letter said there were "legitimate and necessary requirements, clarified by St. Sabina's concerns on coming into the conference."

"All the parishes and the conference itself are called 'Catholic,'" he continued. "Catholic means that we are connected with one another. Decisions cannot be made unilaterally, without consultation



Dianne Towalski/CNS

Student sweatshop

Kristina Sales stitches fabric in the sewing room at Sartell High School in Sartell, Minn. She was among students participating in a 13-hour "sweatshop for a day" learning experience sponsored by Free the Children, an organization fighting the exploitation of children.

with other parishes and, because this has become an issue broader than athletics, with me."

Randall Blakey, St. Sabina's director of ministries, said the fact that racism has become so embroiled within a church organization is one of the saddest facets of the controversy.

Lenzen acknowledged that race has played a role but said that calling people racists will not change them. "It's a realization they're going to have to come to themselves," he said. "And that's a hard process."

While Lenzen and other league members have been stung by public accusations

of racism, St. Sabina staff members say they are receiving letters and phone calls that are racist.

One anonymous caller said: "You wonder why we don't want to play ball with you. Well, think about it. You aren't really Catholic anyway. We've seen some of your services and the way you have your hands in the air like a Baptist or something."

Father John Dowling, conference chaplain, said "Let's get this settled, and let the pastors get on with what they need to do with the racism"

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Contributing to this story was Michelle Martin in Chicago.

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